



CHAPTER 6

The Dehumanizing Effect of Slavery on the Slave Owner

In chapter six, Douglass uses the example of his new master and mistress, Mr. Hugh and Sophy Auld, to reveal how slavery dehumanizes the slave owner as well as the slave. Focus on the first three paragraphs in particular. Note any words that help shape Douglass's argument and then answer the following questions.

WORDS THAT SHAPE DOUGLASS'S ARGUMENT:

1. What initially keeps Sophy Auld from treating Douglass as a slave?
2. Look at the list of words you made above. How do you characterize these words? How does this word choice help Douglass prove his point that slavery hurts the slave owner? How does Douglass's appearance of concern for Mrs. Auld emphasize slavery's debilitating effects on her/him?
3. In paragraph 3 of chapter six, Douglass quotes Mr. Auld forbidding his wife to teach young Frederick how to read: "Now if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy."
This passage offers a portrait of comparison between Mr. Auld and his wife, and serves as a turning point in Douglass's life.
 - a) How does Douglass's quotation of Mr. Auld serve Douglass's own persuasive aims?
 - b) How does this information prove to be a turning point in Frederick Douglass's life?
 - c) What revelation occurs to him in this chapter? And what irony is involved in this revelation?
 - d) Consider the importance of literacy and the effectiveness of using illiteracy as a tool of control. What are some things that you might normally do in the course of an average day that you could not do because you were illiterate? Focus on the ways in which you would be limited and your lives contained.



CHAPTER 7

The Courage to be Intellectually Free

Pay particular attention to chapter 7, paragraph 2 (*"My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another . . ."*) Here, Douglass provides more evidence and conviction that slavery corrupts the slave owner or in this case, Mrs. Auld, the slave owner's wife.

Keep in mind that 19th century America was also known for its **cult of domesticity and sentimentality**—the belief that women were the moral standard bearers in American society.

1. What does it say about this society if a woman can behave as Mrs. Auld does?

Despite Mrs. Auld's best efforts to shut Frederick up in "mental darkness," he perseveres and learns to read. Read carefully through the passage where Douglass describes his plan to learn to read and write.

2. Whom does Douglass find to teach him?
3. How does he learn?
4. How does Douglass use irony to reinforce slavery's dehumanizing influence? Consider, for example, the juxtaposition of the children's hunger next to the description of the "unpardonable offense" of teaching slaves to read in this "Christian country."
5. How does the hypocrisy inherent in slavery bleed over in other aspects of daily life?